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**[Generations of Critical Theory?](#)**

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## Generations of Critical Theory?

This journal is oriented to re-evaluating early critical theory and is therefore an appropriate place to pose some questions about the periodisation of critical theory as a whole. Whether or not one accepts a generational model with Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse et al in the first generation, Habermas, Apel and Wellmer in the second and Honneth, Fraser and a cluster of other German and North American theorists in the third, a model powerfully criticised in relation to Habermas by Stefan Müller-Doohm (2017), there is general agreement that Habermas's project has always been substantially different from that of the earlier critical theorists – themselves of course quite differentiated despite Horkheimer's somewhat managerial attempts to present them as a team.

But whereas Horkheimer's earlier opposition to Habermas was based on anxiety that he was too radical and outspoken (Müller-Doohm 2016: 80-88), later commentators have polarised roughly between those who see Habermas's project as a continuation of critical theory in a different mode more adapted to the realities of postwar advanced capitalist societies with their apparently stable liberal polities and those who see it as an abandonment of some of the more radical motifs of earlier critical theory.

Jay Bernstein (1995: 17), for example, in a book substantially concerned with Habermas, advanced a more ambitious specification of the basic motifs of critical theory. Bernstein argues that the "three demands - for a non-instrumental conception of cognition and reason, for a cultural Marxism, and for an internal connection between those two items - are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for a critical theory of society". Bernstein, along with Gillian Rose, argued for a much more speculative model of critical theory, oriented more strongly to Adorno than to Horkheimer or Habermas, and thus, in his terminology, to issues of meaning and the problem of nihilism rather than to those of exploitation and justice. Rose steered a rather different course, focussed on law and a deep engagement with Hegel and ultimately with religion, but her critique of neo-Kantianism in the first chapter of *Hegel Contra Sociology* (Rose 1981) was intended inter alia to cut the ground from under Habermas's project.

Rose's turn to Hegel, and not to the close-to-Marx Hegel that I feel reasonably comfortable with but to an uncompromising Hegel oriented to the Absolute, was also

a turn from Adorno, the subject of her PhD and her first book, and certainly from the neo-Kantianism which she hunted down, with an almost McCarthyite intensity, not just in Habermas but in sociology as a whole. Whereas in *The Melancholy Science* (Rose 1978: 2) she wrote of the Frankfurt School's 'particular fusion of the Idealism, which arose in opposition to neo-Kantianism, with the revival of Marxism', three years later she was writing that 'The very idea of a scientific sociology, whether non-Marxist or Marxist, is possible only as a form of neo-Kantianism.' (Rose 1981: 2) In Rose's analysis, both Lukács and Adorno tried unsuccessfully 'to break out of the neo-Kantian paradigm of validity and values. Their work has achieved renown as an Hegelian Marxism, but it constitutes a neo-Kantian Marxism.' (Rose 1981: 27) The following pages of her book brilliantly follow the story through Adorno to Habermas, who also 'mistreats' Hegel in order to establish his own methodologically oriented critical theory, which 'has become such a unifying force in the international world of sociological reason'. (Rose 1981: 36)

In both of these rather different *démarches*, which could be paralleled by others in the German debates, there is a common line of critique which fits Habermas much more closely than either Horkheimer or Adorno. In a more polemical intervention, a conference report which was also a brief critique of the undeniable aridity of certain parts of the North American Habermas industry, Peter Osborne (1998) wrote that Habermasians celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 'tied firmly to the mast' (p.54), for 'how are followers of Habermas to celebrate *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the wake of their forced marriage to functionalist sociology and Rawlsian political theory?' (p. 53)

The Habermasian counter-argument, in essence, is that expressed by Habermas when he described his youthful response to reading Lukács, that it was enormously impressive but belonged to a different world. The critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno, especially after the postwar return to Frankfurt, pivoted uneasily between utopianism and sociological business-as-usual; what Habermas wanted was an engagement with the social sciences which underpinned the concept of critique, much as Marx had engaged with economics with the same underlying purpose. Habermas' thought can be seen to steer a course between the twin poles of Kant and Hegel, constantly pursuing abstract systems of argumentation of a recognizably Kantian kind while remaining sensitive to the Hegelian (or sociological) reminder that formal

systems of reasoning exist in a social and historical context. As Hauke Brunkhorst (2009: 219) puts it,

...the critical theory of society, to whose most important premises Habermas adheres, along with Kant, Marx and Adorno, must emerge out of what exists and out of its own autonomous development, in other words, thinking with Hegel against Hegel, must renew Kant's radical, normative universalism.

I shall focus first on the concept of critique in earlier and later critical theory, before addressing some broader issues as they have played out from the 1930s to the present. It seems to me that, rather surprisingly, despite, or perhaps because of, certain connections between Critical Theory's concept of critique and that of Kant, and its much more direct and obvious dependence on Marx's conception, the term critique is very often used in Critical Theory in quite an informal and everyday sense, as in the familiar contrast between 'critical' and 'affirmative' conceptions of culture or between a critical and an uncritical attitude to, say, Critical Theory. First, a word about Marx. Even if Marx wrote relatively little on metatheoretical issues he had, in practice, a fairly coherent conception of critique exemplified in *Capital*. There are of course rough edges to do with the relation between historical and systematic or structural aspects of the model, between what we have come to call social integration and system integration and so on, but the basic model in which the understanding of the object in its contradictory complexity leads to, or perhaps is identical with, an awareness of its historical limits and the need for its replacement seems to me reasonably clear. This model was developed independently by Roy Edgley and Roy Bhaskar in a notion of critique in which the criticism of a false theory in the social sciences sustains, *ceteris paribus*, a critique of the social conditions which account for belief in the false theory.

So much in parenthesis about Marxism. If I am right about this feature of critical theory, the kind of detailed discriminations made by Seyla Benhabib in her brilliant reconstruction of the concept of critique in *Critique, Norm & Utopia* are indeed reconstructive, I think, rather than something present in the self-understanding of the critical theorists - at least until Habermas. A lot of the work, in other words, is not done by the terms 'critique' and/or 'criticism', the two words by which Kritik is rendered in English and which enable a distinction between formal and informal

usages (though at the cost of reifying 'critique' into some sort of special activity and banalising 'criticism' into what Drew Milne, at the conference where I first presented some of these ideas, nicely described as 'polemical disagreement and sustained grumbling'). The burden is borne instead by related terms - notably the fairly closely interdefined terms dialectic(s) and totality - as well as, of course, a particular conception of the contemporary human predicament and of the possibilities of emancipation. I shall focus here on the concept of totality in order to defend a version of it which (*contra* the charge that it is tendentially totalitarian) is not only harmless but useful.

The debt of the early critical theorists to Lukács is of course not in doubt. He certainly helped their journey towards what he later nastily called the Grand Hotel of the Abyss, in which he sees them enjoying the best of everything while looking down on the poor sods down below and where, to his annoyance, they trashed some of the older Marxist furniture in their rooms. What is perhaps less often emphasised, despite Martin Jay's characteristically comprehensive overview, is how much they owed in particular to the idea, clearly present in Marx but expressed most emphatically by Lukács, that the concept of totality is what distinguishes Marxism from 'bourgeois thought' and that 'the primacy of the category of totality is the bearer of the revolutionary principle in science' (Lukács 1971: 27). For Lukács, an orientation to the social totality, seen as a complex of fetishism and reification of social relations between people, is both necessary and, he implies, sufficient, for the adequate understanding of social phenomena such as economic processes. 'It is by virtue of this insight [into fetishism] that the dialectical method and its concept of totality can be seen to provide real knowledge of what goes on in society' (Lukács 1971: 15). As he put it a little later in *Lenin* (Lukács 1970: 18), "For every genuine Marxist there is always a reality more real and therefore more important than *isolated* facts and tendencies - namely, *the reality of the total process*, the totality of social development".

Something like this conception can also be found in a slightly more measured form in the work of Karl Korsch, as Martin Jay (1986) showed in chapter three of his *Totality* book. In his 'Introduction to *Capital*' (p.58, cited in Jay, 1986: 146), Korsch writes, Marx's use of 'contradiction' should be understood as metaphorical. "These tensions are all pictured as 'contradictions', and this can be thought of as a

sophisticated kind of metaphorical usage, illuminating the profounder connections and interrelation between things."

Critical Theory from Horkheimer to Habermas adds some *ceteris paribus* clauses (e.g. Adorno pointing out that Mannheim's totalising approach was hardly revolutionary, and Habermas making the same point for the totalising conception of traditional German gesamte Staatswissenschaft; one might add also the Historical School of political economy). Critical Theory also brackets out Lukács's favouritism about the proletariat and his over-slick image of the identical subject-object of history, but it keeps the basic message. This is, I take it, that an account of a social object which pays proper attention to its context will more or less necessarily be led to an awareness of the conflictual or, if you like, contradictory nature of its relations with that context, of the context itself and indeed of the object itself.

Thus the problem, *pace* Goethe, is not so much that everything isolated is contemptible, but that things studied in isolation will not have their contradictions adequately exposed to the critique they require. What I want to suggest is that Horkheimer's becomes the mainstream conception of critique in critical theory. It coexists however with Adorno's quite substantially different conception, which focuses much more on particular concepts, in a curious anticipation of the analytic philosophy of language that got going in Oxford long after he'd moved out and on, and is driven by a Benjaminian impulse to blow things apart from the inside in a process of demystification, rather than to *pull* them apart by highlighting their complicated relations with and in their milieu. Very crudely, Horkheimer's conception is context-theoretic; Adorno's is concept-theoretic. As Wiggershaus (1994: 189) puts it,

For Horkheimer, dialectics in the first place meant thinking in relative totalities, and served a critical theory of the sciences as evidence that an alternative to the narrowness of the various scientific disciplines and metaphysics existed. For Adorno, dialectics meant the possibility of demythologizing and demystifying a broad spectrum of current phenomena. This linked him with Bloch and Benjamin.

The distinction is only a rough one, because Horkheimer of course also engages in demystificatory conceptual analysis and Adorno is *also* concerned to stress

the social totality, not least in the form of totalitarianism and other pathological manifestations of Herrschaft. And a thinker like Marcuse is probably somewhere between these two ideal-typical poles.<sup>1</sup> For the moment I want to concentrate on Horkheimer's more inclusive and more influential conception, and to defend it against certain possible objections. Horkheimer took, I think, a sensible view of the possibilities of creative interaction between philosophy and the social sciences - a conception later developed more fully by Habermas in a number of articles about the role of philosophy and in his oeuvre as a whole. A neat illustration of this was the memorandum sent from California 'on parts of the Los Angeles Programme of work [i.e. Dialectics of Enlightenment] which could not be done by the philosophers' - i.e. an analysis of the trends of contemporary capitalism and class stratification. (Cited by Wiggershaus, pp.314f). In Adorno, the issue is sometimes too polarised for my taste, as in his implicit critique of Horkheimer in his essay on 'The Actuality of Philosophy' (p.120, cited Jay, 1986: 256): "the idea of science (Wissenschaft) is research; that of philosophy is interpretation". Elsewhere, it is perhaps wrapped up in too much pathos, as in the opening sentence of *Negative Dialectics* that "Philosophy lives on because the moment for its realisation was missed".

In view of Horkheimer's subsequent disavowal of the heritage of earlier critical theory (he notoriously kept the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* out of reach in the re-established Institute for Social Research), and his later decline into rather reactionary positions, it is worth noting that in his speech at the reopening of the Institute he restated this interdisciplinary charter:

When I speak of the broader points of view that must be linked to individual studies, what I mean is that in every question that arises, indeed in the sociological attitude itself, there is always an implicit intention to transcend existing society. Without this intention, although it is hardly possible to describe it in detail, questions will neither be put in the correct way, nor will sociological thinking arise at all. (Cited by Wiggershaus, p. 445)

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno's conception is of course the one with the closest affinities to deconstruction.

It is this earlier interdisciplinary conception which gets somewhat effaced in post-war critical theory, and which Habermas attempts to reinstate. The ways in which he does so are fairly familiar, so I shall merely summarise them here. First, in chronological order, a conception of Marxism (and by extension of critical theory, understood as a more reflective and self-conscious variant (in both senses of the word self-conscious - i.e. embarrassed (about Stalinism) as well as self-aware or *selbstbewusst*) as an empirically testable philosophy of history. Habermas initially attaches to this conception a fairly traditional conception of an expressive totality. Although he later, under pressure from the Popperian Hans Albert, abandons this conception in his second contribution to the *Positivismusstreit* [the methodological dispute between critical theory and Popperian critical rationalism in the early 1960s] in favour of a reliance instead on the concept of rationality, totality remains as a crucial reference-point. (Jay, 1986: 473; 483) Habermas comes later to see this whole model as too traditional.

Second, the 'cognitive interests' model, in which empirically given interests of the human species (in the control of objective nature, in mutual understanding and in emancipation), are constitutive, in a quasi-transcendental manner, of natural science, hermeneutically oriented sciences and emancipatory sciences such as Freudian psychology and the Marxist critique of ideology respectively. (The technical differences in the way these three groups of science are governed by cognitive interests need not concern us here.) Here too, a conception of totality remains central to humanistic and critical sciences, whose theoretical concepts are necessarily selected with reference to what Habermas (1986 [1963]: 210) calls 'an anticipatory interpretation of society as a whole'. This approach too, which Habermas now sees as a detour, founders on a paradox identified by Thomas McCarthy, that nature can hardly both be constituted and be the ground of constituting activity; more generally, it suffers from an excessively epistemological formulation.

Finally, after flirting with the idea of a linguistic foundation for social theory, Habermas settles in the late 1970s on a conception of critical social theory which spirals off from an analysis of the presuppositions embodied in linguistic communication to a broader concept of communicative action set alongside, and prior to, those standardly listed in social theory: normatively guided action (Parsonian functionalism), strategic action (*homo economicus* and rational action theory) and



dramaturgical action as analysed by Erving Goffman and ethnomethodologists following Harold Garfinkel and Aaron Cicourel. Again, without going into details, one should note that a substantial part of the critical element in this conception is the totalising move from individual phenomena, or indeed from individual social or human sciences such as sociology, to a broader conception. The emancipatory movement in a more limited sense is driven by a form of counterfactual reasoning in which human collectivities reflect on whether the social arrangements with which they have ended up are capable of justification in universalistic normative terms or whether we have slipped or been dragooned into them against what 'we' now recognise as 'our' better judgement. In particular, to put the big question with caricatural brevity, could we have had modernity without liberal capitalist exploitation and the wars and other authoritarian consequences of the bureaucratic nation state?

How defensible is such a conception, at least in its broad orientation? To the question raised in another context by Nancy Fraser, 'What's Critical About Critical Theory?' (Fraser 1985), an apparently weak and partial response stressing the totalising movement of thought, where this necessarily implies also a critique of the idea that there is nothing other than instrumental or strategic reason, may be in the end not unuseful.

On the other hand, the parallel critiques of several of the foremost thinkers in the more recent critical theory tradition should give pause for thought. I can only briefly summarise these lines of criticism, concentrating on Axel Honneth, with whom I begin.

As is well known, Habermas rejected the alleged pessimism of post-war critical theory, of what had come to be called the 'Frankfurt School', and his principal work, the *Theory of Communicative Action*, published in 1981, aimed to provide the missing theory of social action as well as a normative foundation for social criticism and what he came to call a discourse ethics. For Honneth, this was the starting point, but he felt that it needed to be complemented by Foucault's analysis of power and a more prominent *theoretical*, as opposed to merely political, focus on concrete social conflicts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Habermas has of course always been a close observer of, and incisive commentator on, the contemporary political scene, but has tended to keep his political writings separate from his theoretical work.

An essay originally presented at the legendary Dubrovnik Center in 1981, 'Moral Consciousness and Class Domination', sets the substantive focus for Honneth's subsequent work. Honneth begins with the central principle of critical theory, which goes back to Hegel's critique of Kantian morality, that effective critique must not be grounded in abstract principles but must also have a social foundation.

If a theory is to do more than merely appeal to the ethical standards upon which it bases its critique, then it must prove the existence of empirically effective forms of morality upon which it can legitimately build. (*Disrespect*, p.80)

This is of course a classically Hegelian trope. Honneth is not yet using the term recognition.<sup>3</sup> However, his focus on injustice contains the basic theme of his next major book, *The Struggle for Recognition*. Habermas, he suggests, has escaped the pessimistic trap of earlier critical theory by his notion, developed in his 'reconstruction' of historical materialism, of a process of moral evolution complementary to the evolution of the productive forces. But Habermas's model, he maintains, 'is constructed in such a way that it must systematically ignore all forms of existing social critique not recognized by the political-hegemonic public sphere' (p.82).<sup>4</sup> Honneth, in other words, is concerned, like Heineken in the beer advertisement, to reach the parts which Habermas cannot: 'all those potentialities for moral action which have not reached the level of elaborated value judgements, but which are nonetheless persistently embodied in culturally coded acts of collective protest, or even in mere silent "moral disapproval" (Max Weber)<sup>5</sup>.' (p. 83)

Honneth writes in the Introduction to *The Struggle for Recognition* (p.1), that he had reached the conclusion in his first book, *Critique of Power*, that

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<sup>3</sup> The term had cropped up in Habermas's speech of 1974 on receiving the Stuttgart Hegel Prize, 'Can Complex Societies Construct a Rational Identity'. Here he writes of 'a flexible identity in which all members of the society can recognize themselves [wiedererkennen] and acknowledge [anerkennen], i.e. *respect* [achten] one another'.

<sup>4</sup> Here of course Honneth is implicitly referring to Habermas's classic analysis of the public sphere and its deterioration under conditions of modern democracy.

<sup>5</sup> Honneth is referring here, he says, to Weber's *Economy and Society* (vol. 2, p. 929).

any attempt to integrate the social-theoretical insights of Foucault's historical work within the theory of communicative action has to rely on a concept of morally motivated struggle. And there is no better source of inspiration for developing such a concept than Hegel's early, 'Jena' writings, with their notion of a comprehensive 'struggle for recognition'.

As he summarised the theory in his inaugural lecture at Berlin,

I distinguished three forms of social recognition which can be regarded as the communicative presuppositions of a successful formation of identity: emotional concern in an intimate social relationship such as love or friendship, rights-based recognition as a morally accountable member of society and, finally, the social esteem of individual accomplishments and abilities. (p.74)

What recognition is contrasted with is not misrecognition<sup>6</sup> but disrespect, seen as the motor and idiom of social conflicts). As the *Internationale* goes, 'nous ne sommes rien, soyons tout', or at least let us be acknowledged for what we are.

It cannot I think be denied that this concept captures a good deal of the notions of natural justice which motivate many social movements of exploited or suppressed people. Strikes, notoriously, often begin with an apparently trivial violation of some perceived right rather than the broader context of ongoing exploitation. Critics of the concept have however argued, with more or less emphasis, that there is something flimsy about it. Nancy Fraser, in particular, has argued for the importance of issues of redistribution, in a friendly critique of Honneth's emphasis on recognition.<sup>7</sup>

The range of current social conflicts with which Honneth engages in his own work and in that which he encourages at Frankfurt is enough to refute charges that the concept of recognition is in some way narcissistic and insubstantial, but it may be partly with these criticisms in mind that he tackled, in his Tanner Lectures at Berkeley in 2005, the grand Marxist theme of reification. Reification is of course Lukács's

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<sup>6</sup> Recognition in German here would be *wiedererkennen*, rather than the sense of acknowledgement conveyed also by *Anerkennung* (cf. Jay, 2008). Habermas, as quoted above (n.3), interestingly uses both terms, and *Achtung* or respect, which in its negative form gives 'disrespect'. It is interesting that the term 'disrespect' plays such an important role in British street culture.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Fraser and Honneth, 2003, and the more hostile critiques by Lois McNay (2007, 2008).

term and *not* Marx's, as Gillian Rose showed in the first of her brilliant books).<sup>8</sup> It is the practical and theoretical treatment of social relations between people as relations between things.<sup>9</sup> In his account of reification, Honneth stresses the sense of 'forgetting' pointed to by Horkheimer and Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: 'All reification is a forgetting'.<sup>10</sup> To say, for example, that I need to shed 'jobs' from my business in a period of austerity is to forget, in this sense, that these are the jobs of the people whose jobs they are. Honneth's aim, in a nutshell, is to detach the notion of reification from its original productivist philosophical anthropology and to show its relevance to a wide range of social pathologies as well as the capitalist exploitation and its mystification which was the focus of Lukács' critique.

Critical theory, for Honneth, is alive and well as resuscitated by Habermas;<sup>11</sup> it needs to be tweaked back into a direction which one could call post-marxist, if the term had not been attached to rather different intellectual and political projects, and which also recalls Marx's early concern with a wide variety of social conflicts.<sup>12</sup> Most important of these, I think, is his bold rehabilitation of a strong notion of social pathology which had tended to be confined to seminar discussions of Durkheim's distinction between the normal and the pathological, and journalistic phrases about our 'sick' or 'broken' societies. In the first essay in *Disrespect*, Honneth ties this to the tradition of 'social philosophy' which, as he notes, has withered away in the Anglo-Saxon countries into a sub-discipline of political philosophy. Against this current, Honneth aims to restore it in relation to 'processes of social development that

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<sup>8</sup> This has a lesson for all of us who pretend to some form of scholarship. Everyone she spoke to said that of course Marx used the term throughout his work; they couldn't of course say just where, off the cuff, and so on. One day I triumphantly pointed out to her a use of the term buried in volume 3 of *Capital* (which of course was published posthumously and therefore might not count), but this is very much the exception which proves the rule. (See *The Melancholy Science*, p. 167, n.20.)

<sup>9</sup> I deliberately use the ambiguous term 'treatment', since what is at issue is not a purely cognitive process.

<sup>10</sup> This quotation appears as one of two epigraphs at the beginning of the lecture series; the other is from Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*: 'All knowledge is based on acknowledgement' (Anerkennung).

<sup>11</sup> See for example Honneth 1985 and Chapters 3 and 5 in *Disrespect*.

<sup>12</sup> See Lubasz, 1977. I do not of course mean to suggest that Marx lost, or Habermas lacks, these concerns; just that the focus on the proletariat in Marx's later work, and a more diffuse notion of humanity as a whole in Habermas', might be complemented by an approach which engages with a wide range of substantive conflicts.

can be viewed as misdevelopments...' (p. 4). The 'diagnosis of the times', a term introduced into Britain by Karl Mannheim, becomes specifically a diagnosis of social pathology. Thus 'In order to be able to speak of a social pathology that is accessible to the medical model of diagnosis, we require a conception of normality related to social life as a whole.' (p.34) In what he calls 'a weak, formal, anthropology' (p. 42)<sup>13</sup>, Honneth gestures towards 'an ethical conception of social normality tailored to conditions that enable human self-realization'. (p. 36)

This important initiative makes explicit something which had been latent in much of critical theory. The theme of suffering of misdevelopment and 'damaged life' (Adorno 1951) pervades the work of the first generation of critical theorists, and Habermas' reworking in *Theory of Communicative Action* of Marxist, Weberian and indeed Parsonian theory (Holmwood, 2009) contains a substantial discussion of social pathologies. Honneth has however pushed this theme further, against the limits of the organic analogies and functionalist assumptions which he, like most of us these days, would find unacceptable.

This is brought out in what is more or less the title essay of the perhaps ambiguously titled *Pathologien der Vernunft. Geschichte und Gegenwart der Kritischen Theorie*. In this essay, 'A Social Pathology of Reason. On the intellectual heritage of critical theory', Honneth suggests that, although we are now a similar distance from the beginnings of critical theory as its protagonists were from the last representatives of classical idealism (p. 28), critical theory is still linked by its model of '...socially effective reason: The historical past is to be understood as a developmental process whose pathological malformation by capitalism can be overcome only by a process of enlightenment carried out by those affected.' (p. 30) Critical theory therefore stands out in the present century against a context dominated by a liberal conception of justice which fails to ground its critique in social and historical explanation and by Foucauldian or hermeneutic lines of social criticism.

What Honneth offers, then, is not so much a critique of Habermas as an alternative programme lying in a similar line of development and engaging recently with, somewhat surprisingly, the work of Talcott Parsons and Jeff Alexander. Seyla Benhabib, by contrast, develops a critique inspired both by Hegel and by

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<sup>13</sup> In the sense, of course, of philosophical anthropology (see Honneth and Joas, 1980).

contemporary feminism, which had also underlain Nancy Fraser's classic piece 'What's critical about critical theory?' (1985); Benhabib's *Critique, Norm, and Utopia* came out the following year. Focusing on Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), Fraser argues that it

...fails to theorize the patriarchal, norm-mediated character of late-capitalist official-economic and administrative systems. Likewise, it fails to theorize the systemic, money- and power-mediated character of male dominance in the domestic sphere of the late-capitalist lifeworld...Thus, while Habermas wants to be critical of male dominance, his diagnostic categories deflect attention elsewhere, to the allegedly overriding problem of gender-neutral reification.

In her positive proposals, Benhabib, to summarise rather brutally, plays off Hegel against Habermas, as Honneth came to do, in the service of what she calls a 'community...of needs and solidarity' (p.341). The phrase is in fact Habermas's own, and solidarity, as Peter Dews perceptively stressed in the title of his edited volume of interviews, *Autonomy and Solidarity*, is a core concept for him, but Benhabib argues that his discourse ethics is shaped too much by a formalistic conception of rights – something which his engagement with legal theory in *Between Facts and Norms* (Habermas 1992) did little to mitigate. Her aim is 'to situate reason and the moral self more decisively in the contexts of gender and community, while insisting upon the discursive power of individuals to challenge such situatedness in the name of universalistic principles, future identities, and as yet undiscovered communities. (Benhabib 1992: 8.) In Benhabib's later work, this is a red thread running through to her analyses of the politics of multicultural Europe.

For Jay Bernstein, Benhabib does not go far enough. 'The meaning of universality in the context of need interpretations will have to shift away from the paradigm of communication altogether since it will have an epistemic component equivalent to whatever is involved in *recognizing* others in their concrete articularity...' (Bernstein 1995, p. 154). Where Honneth turned to Hegel, Bernstein also argued for the relevance of Adorno, and particularly his theory of art – the main focus of his current work. Habermas's sociological account of the colonisation of the

life-world, Bernstein suggested in passing in 2001, in *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, p. 45, ‘...theoretically colonises the very existence it aims to protect. The aphoristic procedure of [Adorno’s] *Minima Moralia* can thus usefully be seen as a corrective to theoretical colonisation; it aims to express as well as reflect (on) the experience of the individual’. If this judgement sounds a little harsh, it is certainly true that Habermas briskly asserted, in a ‘Reply to my Critics’, that a historical materialist conception of progress, as he had reformulated it, or presumably any other, ‘does not at all touch the sensitive zones of the good life – which are, in my view, beyond the grasp of theory.’<sup>14</sup> (Thompson and Held 1982: 228)

I have been dwelling on these works of the 1980s and 1990s not for the sake of nostalgia, but because I think they continue to map out crucial aspects of contemporary social and political theory. As for the question of where all this leaves Habermas today, my inclination, *contra* Gordon Finlayson, Stefan Müller-Doohm and Habermas himself, is to stress the continuities in his thinking and his closeness to what I continue to think of as the first generation of critical theory. Habermas was for a long time reticent about discussing this relationship, and Müller-Doohm’s superb biography adds some more material to the reasons for this distance.

Habermas has also not been keen to found a school. During his career as a full-time academic Habermas sponsored only two Habilitation theses, those of Albrecht Wellmer and Axel Honneth, and Claus Offe, who should know, doubts that one can speak of a Habermasian school. (Müller-Doohm 2016: 206) Habermas declined to be considered for the Directorship of the Institute for Social Research, and when Adorno’s chair was to be filled in 1970, he proposed Leszek Kołakowski and defended his suggestion, against critics in the Faculty, with a warning against seeing critical theory as ‘a kind of institution which has to be preserved by recruiting true believers’. (Müller-Doohm 2016: 165) When inviting Offe in 1970 to join him in the move to Starnberg he wrote that the situation at the Institute was desolate and that he was ‘tired of bearing the social psychological burden of a substitute father’ (Müller-Doohm 2016: 167-8). And yet he wrote in a letter to *SPIEGEL* in 1973, in response to the suggestion that his communication theory was a rejection of Marxism, ‘One can ‘distance’ oneself from people or utterances, but not from scientific traditions which

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<sup>14</sup> As Simon Susen has pointed out, this hardly does justice to Marx’s (admittedly

exist after all to be tested and revised.’ (Müller-Doohm 2016: 136) As he said in 1981, he was not a Marxist in the sense of a religious declaration, ‘But Marxism gave me the impulse and the analytical means to investigate how the relationship between democracy and capitalism has developed’ (*Kleine Politische Schriften I-IV*, 517). And when he returned to Frankfurt and said in his first lecture that he ‘did not intend to continue the tradition of a school’ he went straight on to say that he couldn’t ‘stand at this lectern without recalling the figure and the influence (Wirkungsgeschichte) of Adorno’ (*Die neue Unübersichtlichkeit*, p. 209).

I have written elsewhere about the continuities and discontinuities in Habermas’s relationship to historical materialism (Outhwaite 2014). More relevant, perhaps, is to ask how far he has responded to criticisms from the third generation and, incipiently, a fourth generation of critical theorists such as Rainer Forst in Frankfurt, Martin Saar in Leipzig, Simon Susen at City University in London, Robin Celikates in Amsterdam or Rahel Jaeggi in Berlin. There are several places to look. First, of course, his own main works, including prefaces to later editions of books such as *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Second, the various volumes of essays on his work to which he has contributed a response. Third, the interviews he has given and, fourth and finally, the secondary literature and biographies by Müller-Doohm and others.

Müller-Doohm’s biography provides useful signposts. One is a remark from Habermas himself (at the Wuppertal conference of 2012 on his relationship to historical materialism and now documented in Rapic 2014), which Müller-Doohm uses as an epigraph to the final section of his biography: ‘Wer kennt schon seine wirklich spekulativen Motive?’ (Who really knows the true motives of their speculations?). (Müller-Doohm 2016: 424) As Müller-Doohm goes on to spell out, Habermas is more conscious than most people of the creative tension between intuitions which emerge from one’s life and the demands of scholarship and truth.<sup>15</sup> As he said in an interview:

There is also a dogmatic core to my convictions, of course. I would rather abandon scholarship than allow this core to soften, for those are intuitions which I did not acquire through science, that no person ever acquires that way,

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rare) comments on a communist future.



but rather through the fact that one grows up in an environment with people with whom one must critically engage (sich auseinandersetzen), and in whom one recognizes oneself' (Peter Dews (ed), *Autonomy and Solidarity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, p. 127; translation modified).

And yet, 'When one is oriented to questions of truth...one should not try, as Heidegger and Adorno both did, to produce truths outside of the sciences and to wager on a higher level of insight... (Dews, p. 126). Truth emerges, then, from scholarly exchange.

Borrowing Göran Therborn's phrase 'Vorsprung durch Rethink' (*Marxism Today*, February 1989), we might consider some of Habermas's rethinks, in roughly chronological order. First, his abandonment of the model of what he called an 'empirically falsifiable philosophy of history' in favour of a kind of naturalised epistemology with the model of cognitive interests, followed by the qualifications he introduced in his 1973 'Postscript' to *Knowledge and Human Interests*. As he said in an interview, 'There is one difficulty...which McCarthy showed me. Namely, once you accept that there is a category of sciences which I now...call reconstructive, where do you place them?' (Dews 1992: 193). (This paralleled also in his later turn from an anti-realist position in *Knowledge and Human Interests* to one which is much more sympathetic to realism and framed in terms of reconstructive science.

Then we might think of *Legitimation Crisis* (1973) and *The Reconstruction of Historical Materialism* (1976) as, among other things, a response to the rather strident Marxism of the 1968 years. By then Habermas was making the major turn in his thought, to his mature model of communicative action; when I edited the *Habermas Reader* in the mid-1990s he was distinctly cool about the idea of including a substantial amount of his earlier work, which he saw as superseded. By the time of *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), closely followed in 1984 by a volume of 'earlier studies and additions', Habermas was taking some rather ill-judged side-swipes at Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida, and his reconciliation with them, at least as people though perhaps not fully with their ideas (unlike, for example, Wellmer and Honneth, who were always much more open and conciliatory), is another modification of his initially harsh approach.

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<sup>15</sup> See also Müller-Doohm 2014.

1989 brought Habermas up short, like all of us, and he had eventually to revise his rather negative initial response to the *Wende*, which at first he saw, unusually for him<sup>16</sup>, in rather parochial West German terms. It is worth noting that, although Habermas did not devote much of his published work before 1989 to an analysis of state socialist societies, his approach made possible some of the most creative work in the analysis of these regimes. Thus, whereas more orthodox Marxist approaches concentrated on the issue of how state socialist modes of production should be understood, Habermas and others, such as Andrew Arato, using a Habermasian approach, put these questions in a rather broader framework. 1989 was also the time when Habermas wrote a substantial preface to the new German edition of *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which contains a number of qualifications about the way he had made the argument in 1961. (Calhoun 1992) In his more recent work on legal and democratic theory, Habermas has returned to this theme, stressing the interplay between law and democratic politics and the relation of both of these to more informal processes of public discussion. Just as important as the formal relations between the legal and political institutions of the constitutional state are the quality and extent of public communication. The public sphere, he writes in *Between Facts and Norms* (1992), should not be seen as an institution or organization, but as ‘a network’ in which ‘flows of communication are filtered and synthesized in such a way that they condense into public opinions clustered according to themes’. In the modern world, these processes of communication are increasingly mediated, in both senses of the word: they take place both at a distance and increasingly via the mass media. In other words, rational discussion of public issues is not confined to face-to-face encounters in larger or smaller assemblies, taking place in real time. What this might mean in practice for a political theory of communicative democracy remains an issue that clearly requires further exploration.

His focus on law and democratic theory, in the large research project culminating in *Between Facts and Norms* (1992) is not so much a rethink as a clarification, that the communication action model did not after all intend to present all politics as an eternal academic seminar or an anarchist utopia. If there is a rethink here, it is perhaps his rather problematic shift from a largely critical take on

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<sup>16</sup> See however Turner 2004; Hess 2017

juridification (Verrechtlichung) in *Theory of Communicative Action* to what many critics have seen as an uncritical approach to law.

Perhaps the most significant modification of Habermas's approach might however be a text which is easily overlooked: a volume of essays published in 1996 called *The Inclusion of the Other*. Although *The Inclusion of the Other* does not go as far in the direction of a greater openness to difference as the title perhaps suggests, it does however contain a discussion of group rights in multicultural societies. Here he responds, among other things, to critiques of the formalism of his model. In the preface to *The Inclusion of the Other* he stresses that he is defending

...a morality based on equal respect for everybody and on the universal solidarity and responsibility of each for all. Postmodern suspicion of an indiscriminately homogenizing universalism fails to grasp the meaning of this morality...a universalism that is highly sensitive to differences.

This volume, like *The Postnational Constellation*, marks Habermas's engagement with globalisation and European integration, which has become the major focus of his public interventions. Here, as I have described elsewhere, there is a growing undertone of pessimism alongside a bold defence of the European project. I should also mention a turn *not* taken. Despite his engagement with religious belief and a conception of the 'post-secular' which annoys both secularists like me and believers like Hans Joas, he has stressed that he has 'become old but not pious'.

Finally, I should confront the real question at issue: where is Habermas today? More sharply, has his project come to an end, not just in the sense that he is old enough to ease off (he announced that his most recent (twelfth) volume of collected political writings, *The Lure of Technocracy*, would probably be the last), but that perhaps there is anyway little more to add and that the project has run out of steam? It is certainly possible to argue that you don't need two big volumes to explicate the idea of communicative action, or 667 pages to trace the links between law and democracy, nor however many books and articles to explicate and defend the moral point of view. For my money, though, these remain stupendous achievements which bear comparison, *sub specie aeternitatis* (or at least from the perspective of someone now also enjoying retirement), with those of an earlier generation of 'young Hegelians'.

Note: this paper draws on a contribution to a conference on ‘Critique and Deconstruction’ at the University of Sussex in July 1998, a review article ‘Recognition, Reification and (Dis)respect’, *Economy and Society* 38, 2, May 2009, pp. 360-7, and on my Gillian Rose Memorial Lecture, ‘Habermas Today’, also at Sussex, in December 2014.

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